

ALLEN, ELSIE COMANCHE,
POMO BASKETMAKING : A SUPREME ART
FOR THE WEAVER./

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POMO BASKETMAKING

A SUPREME ART

FOR THE WEAVER

by Elsie Allen

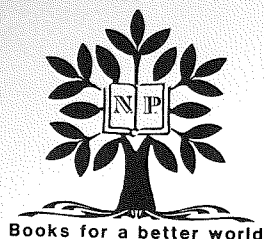
Edited by Vinson Brown



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DEDICATION

*To my Mother, and to all other weavers
of Pomo baskets, past, present, and in the
future.*



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THE OLD TEACHER AND THE YOUNG LEARNER

Mrs. Annie Burke, mother of Mrs. Elsie Allen, showing a young Pomo Indian relative how to work on a lattice weave, number 4 twine basket. Photo taken in Hopland, California, about 1935. Unfortunately, the young learners are few and far between today, as the young Indian girls grow up in the white man's culture and use easy-to-get manufactured items. We hope that soon more people will come to know the deep and rich satisfaction that comes from learning and perfecting this ancient and extremely beautiful art of the Pomo people.

PREFACE

The Pomo Indians had a unique feeling in the old days for the earth and its life that we need to understand. Understanding will help us appreciate the beauty and goodness of this land we live in and fill us with the desire to help preserve that beauty from its destruction.

Take a Pomo Basketweaver, for example. She worked constantly with sky and earth and living plants and with great patience and devotion to create something of superlative beauty, a tribute to the harmony of man with the universe. She watched the sky and also felt the sky, its changing moods and its signs of what was coming, so that she knew by the literal feel of the air, something reaching into her inner being, that now was a good time to make a trip to the eastern mountains to collect the reddish bark of the Redbud Tree, a bark that could be made into strips and used to weave beautiful red designs onto the sides of baskets.

Another day would come, probably in late February, when she felt the warmth of an early spring rising as an ethereal flavor out of the warm earth and the smell of young green growing things, and these signs would tell her that the sedge roots in the marshy and low spots near rivers or other large streams were growing now with wild abandon beneath the soil. Now they could be dug up from that soil to be made into basket coils; to weave around willow withes found at an earlier date.

In digging for those roots, or touching the willow twigs and the Redbud bark, her fingertips told her many stories out of the womb and the matrix of Mother Earth. They told her when the sandy loam in which the sedge roots grow was getting thicker and more easily dug, thus providing growing room for the very longest roots, ones especially prized by basketweavers. Bark touch—smooth or rough—told her when to strip the bark. Wood strength and give, in willow branchlets, told her when the willow was just right to be cut and formed into a basket's skeleton.

When all the days and months of creating a basket went past—the warm days of digging, the soft touch of the earth, the good feel of the root strips, the watching of them drying in the sun, the exact splitting of the sedge roots to make the final basket weave, the wetting of just the right amount to make them resilient when weaving, the weave itself rising into beauty under her fingers, the final touch of bright bird feathers, woodpecker and duck, bluebird and oriole—she felt a music of harmony with all living things and with the Spirit that is quite unique.

—Vinson Brown

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(2) Elsie Allen and Finished Baby Basket
Photo by Robert Cooper



I

THE LIFE OF ELSIE ALLEN, POMO BASKETWEAVER

Elsie Allen is well known today for her basketweaving art. This art was handed down to her by her mother and her mother's mother before her from a long line of Pomo Indian basket weavers who lived on this good earth of Sonoma, Mendocino and Lake Counties in California for thousands of years. Her ancestors knew every hill and canyon, every river and spring. They felt akin to every tree, shrub and flower, animal, bird and insect. Even the rocks were part of their heritage. Elsie's story tells us about some of this heritage in this last 70 odd years.

I was born near Santa Rosa on September 22, 1899, at a time which was very bad for my people. During the previous one hundred years the white people had come by wagon trains—in groups from the south and the north, bringing disease, war and destruction to our way of life until we had become a few little bands of people huddled here and there in what had once been our country, fighting to stay alive by working for the ranchers usually at sheepshearing or wood chopping and in the hopfields.

My parents were George and Annie Comanche, and I was baptised Elsie Comanche at the just being built Catholic Church in Santa Rosa.

But I have no proof of my birth, as it was recorded only in the Catholic Church and this was lost. We were all nominal Catholics, but seldom saw a priest as we lived too far away from where there was a church. Some old religious beliefs of the Pomo people we carried into the new religion of the Catholic Church, and one of these was fasting. We fasted for many things, for example we would fast before starting work on a basket such as a red feather or woodpecker feather basket and would work at it as long as possible and then when we were too hungry we would eat but no longer work on the basket. The fasting was for purification so as to receive help from the Great Spirit in whatever we did.

I lived with my grandmother in my very early years. This was in the Cloverdale area. Cloverdale of course at that time was a small village with one main store that served the nearby ranches. We lived a rather isolated existence and since I had no toys or playmates, rocks and leaves served well to build houses and to make doll people. Wormwood was a favorite for doll people, the tips being good to bend over for hair. It was fun to climb Madrone trees for leaves that the leaf miners were busy designing. It was fun also walking through the water of a swift stream hunting cattail-like grass. The muddy roots were cleaned off and it became hair for other doll people. Elderberry bushes, willows and other trees were named as persons and given a personality in my imagination. Othertimes I would run through the animal trails in the Chamise brush with my mother's fox terrier. We would run and run for simply hours. Before we would start running the dog would jump around and run ahead of me and turn around as if to say "Come on, Hurry up!" Sometimes I would run a different way and when the dog missed me he would come back and look for me. He was as happy as I to have a playmate and was a favorite pet along with a kitty I treasured. These playtimes gave me an appreciation of nature, but of course all this isolation made me overly shy even among children of my own age.

We suffered much from the diseases of the white people in those early days. I was very sick with the measles when I was five years of age. Since no white doctors were available, we used many healing herbs. I remember when sick at this time having nightmares of giant roosters walking about me and crowing at me so that I was very frightened. When I was about six my grandfather, an Indian singing doctor, told my

parents that he could protect me from most diseases by a special ceremony. He built a very hot fire and threw a live turtle into it which was killed instantly by the heat. It was then pulled out by some long stick tongs, and I was given its hot blood to drink. I kept choking on it, but finally got the stuff down. It is possible this may have saved me from tuberculosis later, as when I was at the Indian school in Covelo at the age of eleven, and was very sad and lonely an older Indian girl who had tuberculosis befriended me. She gradually got so sick she had to stay in bed and I was given the job of taking her food to her. She ate so lightly that much of it was left. As I was near to starving in those days because of being too shy to grab for food in a hurry on the table as the other children did, I was helped greatly by being able to eat all that left-over food of the sick girl. But I never caught TB because of this, even though I used the same spoon! This food probably kept me strong and prevented me from getting sick in other ways.

My father died when I was about eight and my mother soon after that married Mr. Richard Burke, who was half-Pomo and half-English. He took us north to live near Hopland and he was a very kind step-father to me. There we lived with my great uncle and grandmother and great-grandmother on a ranch, in a small 3-room house. My great uncle worked on a ranch near Cloverdale. In the summer we moved down by the river and built a kind of hut like our people had in the old days, a house made of leaves put over willow frames. We cut the willows down and wove them over posts, then covered this with leaves. The roof of our house was made from willow branches set across the roof top and smaller willow twigs were woven in and out to form a solid roof to keep the hot sun out. We had two different rooms for bedrooms, and in one my grandmother built me a bed that was high off the ground on cross-pieces of willow resting on four large stakes put into the ground. She made a mattress out of corn husks and fine straw put into a bed tick, and placed it on top of my bed. It was so high that I had to climb up on a box to get into it. This was to keep it out of reach of snakes.

My great uncle worked in the vineyards and also helped with the cows and horses and the haying. There were no hops in Cloverdale at that time. He used to help also with the milking. Down near the Asti winery they had a summer resort where my grandmother worked by

helping with the washing. My mother used to hide me or make me hide whenever the white people came because we had heard of Indian children who had been kidnapped. We usually hid in the bushes. My grandmother said that when she was young a number of Indian children were brought down from the north by whites, riding on mules. Her aunt fed about seven or eight of these small children who were being carried south and then to be sold to ranchers. They were so starved they swallowed their food whole. My people wept when these children were taken away for they feared they would be treated badly.

We continued to live in a wood house during the cold months, but went down to the river to live in a willow and brush house during the summer. We bought flour and sugar and other items from the store and used a wood stove to cook upon which I preferred to the old ways of my grandmother who cooked by an open fire such foods as ground acorns, pinole (a ground up wheat), deer meat and fish, and other gathered foods. We also fished and hunted for game and gathered acorns from the oaks nearby in the fall, and then ground and leached the acorns to make into acorn mush. Today I like acorn mush so much that I gather the acorns by the sackful every fall.

I had received no education up until I was eleven and it was in that year that I was taken away from my family and sent to Covelo in northeastern Mendocino County, where there was an Indian Reservation with an Indian school. A government agent came to see us and talked my mother into letting me go to that place, which was about 80 miles away from where we lived. In those days there were no highways or buses and I had to travel through the wilderness of pines and firs most of the way. Six other Indian children from the Hopland-Ukiah area travelled with me. First I went on a wagon to Ukiah and then we were all put on a flat-bed railroad car of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad and carried by the train to wooded Sherwood Valley where we changed to a stagecoach that carried us north to Laytonville, where we stayed overnight. The next day a gravel wagon picked us up to take us to Covelo. I remember being frightened by the big river, the Eel, and of the giant trees we rode under, which I thought at any minute would fall down on me. I was very tempted to jump out of the wagon and run away.

At the Covelo Indian school they placed me in a dormitory with other Indian girls. At that time I could not yet speak English, and soon

found myself unable to follow simple dressing and eating chores of the daily existence because we children were not supposed to speak Indian, a rule of most government Indian schools at that time. I had learned the middle Pomo dialect to proficiency. At first there was only one girl there I really knew and she was put in a different age group so I did not see her very often. They tried to keep me busy by giving me cards that had holes in them through which I was supposed to twist some yarn. It seemed so useless. Worst of all this dormitory was burned down one night, the fire believed to have been started by some older girls who hated the school, and I lost nearly all my clothes that my mother had so carefully packed and sent with me.

We had to move to a boy's dormitory and there I was forced to wear boy's clothes. We were given various duties to do, but it was hard for me to understand and sometimes I was punished when I did them wrong because of lack of understanding of the language. Finally I was given one dress, but I could not read the label on it and it looked so much like other dresses that when I picked out what I thought was my dress and put it on another girl would often come up very mad and take it away from me. In time I learned to wait until every girl had taken her dress and then figure out mine was the last one there and take it. We usually did our work in the morning, then cleaned up at noon and put on our school clothes to go to classes where I seemed to learn nothing at all. My stay at Covelo was not very fruitful because of this language barrier, and I often cried at night with homesickness.

It was so good to get home after that useless school that I followed my mother around wherever she went for days just to feel near to her. When I was thirteen the government opened a school for Indian children on the Rancheria where I lived near Hopland. A teacher came there daily and fortunately she was kind and patient about the language problem so I finally began to learn how to read, write and talk English. I went to school there about three years.

Around this time the Sisters of Saint Dominick came to the reservation to teach the Catholic Faith. Their dark clothes and white faces frightened me at first, but gradually I got used to them, and even began to think maybe I should become a nun, but my mother strongly objected. This did make me feel that when I had children I would not prevent them from doing what they wanted to do.

I started working in the hopfields when I was ten years old and

during my teens to help add to our family income. This was very hot work during the summer and eventually I decided I wanted to learn something better. So at eighteen I visited one of the Catholic priests in Ukiah, whom we liked, and asked him about different kinds of jobs. He took me to San Francisco to visit the St. Joseph's Hospital, which I liked very much and would have liked to work there. But instead he took me to two elderly ladies who needed help. I started my first job at about \$35.00 a month with room and board. I was never allowed out on the street alone so that after three months I began to feel like I was a prisoner in confinement and told them I wanted to quit. Angrily they packed my suitcase, flung open the front door, and told me to go.

Out in the street in San Francisco at eighteen years of age, I really felt lost at first, but soon found a streetcar heading for the Ferry Building and started traveling. From there a very helpful policeman directed me to the Saint Joseph's Hospital. Since it was the last year of the First World War, 1918, and there was a shortage of help, the hospital officials gladly offered me a job. I worked there happily for six months and was given the additional job of taking other employees to St. Boniface Church on Sunday morning and to Golden Gate Park for an outing in the afternoon to hear the band concerts at the park. My employers thought I knew my way about the city, but actually I got along fine by asking questions of conductors and policemen I met.

But just as I was getting to do my work well in the hospital pantry with chances for advancement I came down with the prevailing flu, and had to be sent home. At home I might have starved because my stomach would not hold down any regular food, but I was saved by my mother cooking me lots of acorn mush, which was so bland that it stayed down and nourished me back to health.

On May 1, 1919 I married my present husband, Arthur Allen, a northern Pomo, in a ceremony at Saint Mary's Catholic Church in Ukiah. After the Christian ceremony, he and his family came to my mother's place near Hopland for a traditional style Indian wedding. Blankets, hankerchiefs and similar gifts were given to my mother and step-father, while my family gave his family baskets full of Indian clam-shell money, ground down and pierced so the individual shells could be hung on strings like necklaces.

Our first child was Genevieve, who was born on July 31, 1920, the year we moved to the Pinoleville Indian Rancheria near a ranch on

which Arthur worked. Leonard, the second baby, was born on March 10, 1922, while the third, Dorothy, was born on December 15, 1924, in Hopland. These three were all born only with the help of a midwife. My last baby was George, born on February 28, 1928.

In the time when our children were young we were so sure that only English would be of use to them in later life that most of the time we talked only English in front of them so that was the only language they learned. Now we are not so sure and are beginning to feel it is sad they did not learn their own native tongue. In 1932 we voted on the reservation to have our children go to school with the whites and this was probably good in getting them to know about the other race first hand, an experience we had not had as children.

During the years up to the age of 62, I worked at many jobs, including various harvestings of crops, and finally in a laundry after my children had grown up. But somewhere within me was the urge to come back to basketmaking. My mother and my grandmother worked at basketweaving when I was a child. When I was older I gathered sedge roots, willows, bulrushes and redbud at the same places she did such as Dry Creek Road, Mill Creek Road and in Guerneville where the Hacienda Resort is today and with the help of my mother and grandmother we cured the material and made it into baskets. However my grandmother died in 1924, so not only did I lose her help, but most of her examples of baskets as well as it was customary for an Indian woman to have all her baskets and reeds buried with her.

In the first few years of my married life, I attempted basketweaving. I made a basket of about eight or nine inches and that was buried with my grandmother. My next one-stick coiled basket was buried with my great uncle. A third basket was passed all around to relatives when someone died and finally somehow came back to us and was buried with my brother-in-law. I didn't have a good feeling about making baskets after that. Mother told me that she did not want this to happen with her as she wanted me to have her baskets to help me when I started up basketweaving again. So I promised her I would do this. Mother showed baskets for seven years. She showed baskets at the Boonville Fair, and around. She liked people and noticed how people liked the basket displays. She wanted me to travel and meet people through the baskets and not destroy her baskets and have nothing left for me and others in the future. Mother died in 1962, and I have tried to keep my promise.

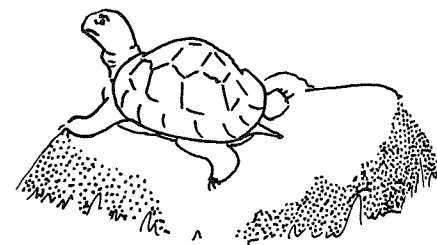
Unfortunately some of my Pomo people were not pleased with me for doing this and even some of my own family came to me and told me I should stop doing it. They felt these old ways should die and we should forget the past heritage. Perhaps they thought the people would laugh at us for taking up things our ancestors once did, and some were afraid if other people learned to make baskets like the Pomo they would sell them and get rich from our art. Even one white gentleman came and told me I should not do it because it would destroy a lot of plants. He did not understand what I knew very well that the cutting out of roots and trimming of shrubs actually helped spread the growth and there was no danger as long as the digging and cutting was not overdone at any one place.

Also I felt very strongly that my people who opposed my basketmaking were wrong and were letting fears overcome their better sense, as how could we ever bring back an understanding of our own background and the beautiful things our old people did if we did not revive some of these arts. I am hoping that more and more of my people are now beginning to understand that this is really true. I was helped in my determination to be a basket weaver and have pride in my work and in my people by an experience that happened to me when I was fifty. My daughter visited me and invited me to go with her to a Chinese restaurant where I expected to see none but Chinese eating. I was amazed to see other races eating there and saw also how proud the Chinese were of their heritage. Since I felt that the Pomos were one of the greatest basket weavers in the world I resolved in my heart that this wonderful art should not be lost and that I would learn it well and teach others.

When I was 62 years of age I finally found the time I was seeking to start my basketweaving again. I went out and dug the roots and gathered the willows and hunted around for the beautiful twigs of red-bud myself. I have been able to create many fine baskets from those as small as a dime up to large storage baskets and including some of the famous feather baskets that made the Pomos renowned. There is a rich and beautiful feeling to have these useful and lovely baskets grow into being under the work of your own hands and the designs that grow with them. From 1969 to August 1971 I finished 54 baskets.

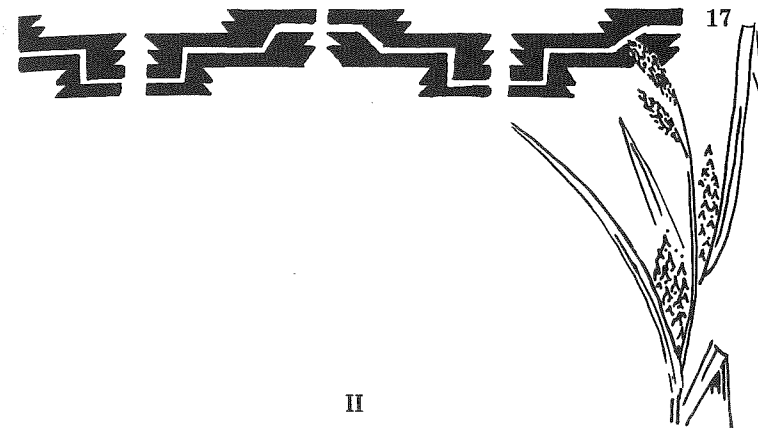
In the last four years I have taught the art of basketweaving at Mendocino Art Center in Mendocino City. Several weekends in the spring are set aside to teach the students how to gather material and later on they are shown how to cure and finally weave the baskets. I would have from eight to sixteen students. I didn't attract many Indian girls as they did not like to dig in the mud. I am happy to teach all and would be especially happy if some local Indian girls would become interested in learning this art.

Basketweaving needs dedication and interest and increasing skill and knowledge; it needs feeling and love and honor for the great weavers of the past who showed us the way. If you can rouse in yourself this interest, feeling and dedication, you also can create matchless beauty and help me renew something that should never be lost.



The photograph below shows a typical streamside woodland of the California Coast Range. Here is where California Indians found most of their materials for making baskets. Willow, cottonwood and alder are generally the trees found closest to the water. The fast-growing willows furnish a plentiful and continuous supply of willow withes for the basket frameworks. Not all streamside, however, have the proper conditions for growing bulrushes and sedges, whose roots are abundantly used in Pomo basketry. It is necessary to find places along streams where the current is not too swift so that enough sandy soil has been allowed to accumulate in low areas near the river's edge or streamside for these plants to grow. Such places should be marked on a map whenever found so that you can come back to them to gather the sedge and bulrush roots at intervals of about three years. This pruning of the sedge roots in the ground every three years is actually good for the plants, preventing the roots from growing so thick they overuse the nutrients in the soil and preventing the roots from growing into tangled masses that are so hard on basketweaving diggers!

See illustrations on page 21 of the four kinds of plants used in basketweaving.



II

GATHERING MATERIALS FOR USE IN POMO BASKETWEAVING

This can be either an adventure and lots of fun, or drudgery and hard work, depending on how you look at it. In the old days, the time of going out to gather basket materials was undertaken by Pomo Indian women and girls with much the same happiness and anticipation as going on a picnic. Usually they chose nice, sunny days so that the trips down along the creeks and rivers looking for sedge roots, willow withes and bulrushes, or up into the eastern hills to find redbud twigs, were times of adventure, much laughter, and bantering, as well as hard work when the right materials were found. The work, however, which involved the handling and cutting of plant materials and the digging for roots in the warm earth in springtime, gave a feeling of being a part of the beautiful natural world. It was healthful and invigorating, a good muscle- and nerve-building tonic, while the warm, delightful hours passed till the time came to pause and have a good belly-filling picnic lunch of acorn meal mush, roots, tubers, and maybe a cooked rabbit or rat. And all about, the birds were singing and many interesting animals or insects could be watched—especially by the children, who helped their mothers only until they got tired.

WILLOWS

These vary in color from gray to white. White withes, or twigs, are picked and cut in short or long lengths for use in different size baskets. They are gathered usually in the spring when the leaves first appear, or in the fall. Long straight twigs not more than one-half inch thick are best.